

**THE IMPERFECT PRAYER LIFE AND THE DESIRE FOR COMMUNION WITH GOD** - Part three - Sunday, October 6<sup>th</sup> 2024 - 5:30 p.m.  
Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

**James 5:13-18** - “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. [14] Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. [15] And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. [16] Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. [17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. [18] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”

What does the Holy Spirit **do** inside my own skin to help me pray? Most of us have some general concepts that flock around mysterious, religious sounding terms like **anointing** and **blessing** and **flowing** and **reviving** and the like. But what actually **happens** when the Holy Spirit helps me pray? Surprisingly, I chose a text that doesn't specifically mention the Holy Spirit at all. But I think you'll start to see His work more clearly.

- 1) **FOR STARTERS, EFFECTIVE PRAYER IS PRAYER DIRECTED TOWARD A SPECIFIC END OR GOAL**

We need to proceed carefully here. When I say effective prayer needs a definite object I **don't** mean prayer should be **selfish**. James has already dealt with that problem in **James 4:2-3** - “**You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.**”

But prayer doesn't have to be **selfish** to be **specific**. Our opening text is full of examples. In **verse 13** there is prayer for human suffering as well as thankfulness praise for God's presence and blessing. In **verses 14-15** there is a corporate plan for praying for the physical needs of the church family. In **verse 16** there is a corporate plan for confessing and receiving cleansing for personal sin. In **verses 17-18** we have the example of Elijah praying for rain for the crops of the nation.

The point of this great prayer text is all of these **prayer situations** were responses to specific situations. And the other point is these were all **corporate** prayer situations. James **uses** Elijah's prayer time, true enough, but only to encourage the church **gathered together** for her own prayer needs.

We closed last week's lesson warning of the dangers of merely "**saying prayers**". There may be times when we pray simply because we need to develop the habit of daily waiting on God. Devotional habit certainly has a place of great importance in the believer's walk with God. And we all need the fresh call to **wait on God**. To learn to know His voice. Do steep in His presence.

Yet even here there can be danger. It's easy to enter the place of prayer with nothing more than a pagan concept of achieving inner peace and oneness with the universe. Prayer is not mysticism. It can be petition. It can be intercession. It can be worship and thanksgiving. It can also be listening to God for His direction. Certainly one need not be in a state of emergency before one prays.

But, having said all that, prayer is still too important to be **thoughtless**. The mind needs to do more than merely **meander aimlessly**. **Anything** can be brought to God in prayer. That's true. But at least **something** should occupy our minds.

One can see this over and over in the Scriptures. People who prevailed in prayer in the Bible were always specific and focussed in the prayers. They were people who prayed about ***something***. Check these references for yourself: Abraham (**Genesis 18:20-33**), Jacob (**Genesis 32:22-32**), Moses (**Exodus 32:7-14**), Elijah **1 Kings 18:36-46**), Daniel (**Daniel 9:1-4, 15-19**), and Jesus (**Luke 22:39-46**). They prayed with ***specific intentions***.

While not many would agree with everything **Charles Finney** wrote, he has some powerfully relevant things to say about prayer: "**A person must have some definite object before his mind. He cannot pray effectually for a variety of objects at once. *The mind is so constituted that it cannot fasten its desires intensely upon many things at the same time.***"

2) **EFFECTIVE PRAYER FOLLOWS THROUGH ON SPIRIT GIVEN DESIRES** - There are two lessons that we need to consider here:

- a) ***The Holy Spirit gives spiritual desires to people*** - You would only see this ***indirectly*** in our text from James. Elijah is the example James chooses to excite the passion for prayer in this church. Elijah prayed for ***drought*** and then ***rain***. Most people forget the first part of that request.

But what **made** Elijah pray for drought? Who **does** that? Elijah did because the people, under the leadership of wicked king Ahab, were turning their backs against God. Elijah prays for God to close the heavens of rain and then open them again three and a half years later. And he does it - though James assumes the story is well enough known he doesn't have to point out the obvious - all at the **command of God**.

That's the important point. This wasn't just Elijah blowing his top at Ahab. The voice of God - the Holy Spirit - sets Elijah's heart on fire over this issue of the nation's righteousness. The Holy Spirit is at the root of James' great effective prayer example. He moves hearts. He draws attentive souls into prayer and intercession.

Of course, one **learns** what this is all about over time. God is very patient. One of the ways to recognize the Spirit's work prompting prayer is to **take note of concerns and inclinations** that grow beyond the ordinary in your daily life. Or watch for an unusual **sense of weight and burden** over an issue that wouldn't normally move you so. Watch for passions that **don't go away** with a good night's sleep.

For example, are you suddenly troubled about the condition of some unsaved person? It's certain that **Satan** didn't plant that concern in your heart. Has the sleepy, cool condition of the Church suddenly had a jarring effect on your conscience? That's the Holy Spirit calling you to prayer and intercession. The tendency is to write these impressions off as simply our own minds. This quenches the Spirit's work.

- b) ***Prayer is deepened when we follow through on what the Holy Spirit's prompting with diligent prayer*** - The Holy Spirit ***influences***, calls and invites us to partner with Him in fervent times of focussed prayer. But **we** must pray. After He speaks to our hearts there are ***two mistakes*** that can short-circuit His workings through us:

- i) ***We can divert our attention to other things and not heed the Spirit's summons to prayer.*** This probably happens more often than we realize. Many of the Spirit's inclinations in our hearts are quenched before fulfilling their divine intent. Other pursuits, distractions, and the time pressures of the day can pull us away from the call to some specific spiritual task:

**Matthew 13:22-23 - "As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. [23] As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."**

- ii) ***We can offer up a quick prayer for the Lord to work in that situation.*** True, this may be better than nothing. But does it honestly line up with James' model as pictured in the prayer of *Elijah*?

Or does it line up with the passionate intercession we studied last week in the prayer of the church in **Acts 4:23-24, 29-31** - **“When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. [24] And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them....[29] And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, [30] while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." [31] And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”**

James simply *mentions* the prayer of Elijah without describing it. First Kings tells us Elijah prayed **seven times** for rain. And he would have kept on praying had he not seen the answer on the way. He put his head between his knees. This was hardly a quick mention of his desire while waiting for a red light to turn green.



Jesus dealt with this theme of *persisting* in prayer repeatedly: **Luke 11:5-10** - “And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, [6] for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; [7] and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? [8] I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. [9] And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. [10] For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.”

Jesus seemed to indicate that one of our problems in prayer was we start praying for a need, and then quit and move on to something else before the answer comes in fullness. The *reasons* for the delay aren't given. But they aren't the focus of Jesus' teaching. The focus is *staying with the asking* until the answer comes.

Look at the shocking term Jesus uses in His parable in **verse 8** - “I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his **impudence** he will rise and give him whatever he needs.”

**“Impudence.”** There are times we risk looking impudent in our refusal to quit asking. There are times we risk looking stubborn. Not always, perhaps. But during those times we sense the Holy Spirit drawing us - burdening us - with a call to prayer. Don’t quit too soon. The simple rule here seems to be that I should remain at prayer until:

- a) ***The answer is seen and the prayer is no longer needed, or***
- b) ***There is a clear indication from the Lord that he has another answer in mind and the burden of prayer is lifted by His sovereign hand, rather than lost through my own laziness or lack of concentration!***

And that **does** happen sometimes. For an example of this see David's prayer for his sick son in 2 Samuel 12:15-23 - "Then Nathan went to his house. And the Lord afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. [16] David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. [17] And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. [18] On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us. How then can we say to him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm."

**[19] "But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead."**

**[20] Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. He then went to his own house.**

**And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. [21] Then his servants said to him,**

**"What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive; but when the child died, you arose and ate**

**food." [22] He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' [23] But now he is dead. Why**

**should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."**